

***Violet, an Animated Short Film***

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

Written by Elijah Gannaway, *Violet* is a story that is not meant to be another feel-good animated short film. The main character, Isaac, lives in a privileged red city when he finds himself taking care of a lost blue girl, sparking a series of events that tackle issues of race and morality. As two people of color in Caucasian dominated fields, Elijah and I want *Violet* to spark meaningful conversation about these issues. I add my own voice to this conversation in the way I know best - animation. *Violet* began the summer of 2018 and brought together a group of people who, at that time, had never worked on an animated short film. I am able to compare the knowledge and experience I have now to the way I approached the project back then by explaining the process that has gone into creating *Violet*.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Prof. John Ludwick for advising me throughout this project. His guidance and critiques have made the film stronger than it ever could have been otherwise.

I would also like to thank Elijah Gannaway for trusting in the team and me to bring his incredible story to life.

Lastly, thank you to Eimhear, Monica, Madison, and Bailey for lending your time and talent to continue to see this project through.

## Process Analysis Statement

In May 2018, a friend and co-worker of mine, Elijah Gannaway, approached me with an idea. A filmmaker in Ball State University's Telecommunications program, Elijah had a new story he wanted to tell, only this time he envisioned it being animated. He pitched to me his rough outline of the story and asked if I would be willing to help. Hearing what he had in mind, I could only say yes. This idea was *Violet*.

That summer, Elijah and I worked together to flush out the story of *Violet* in more detail. Our setting was a red city filled with red people. A man named Isaac is unemployed and raising his young son alone after the death of his wife, when he finds himself also taking care of Nyla, a blue girl from outside the city. Isaac hides her, knowing that if seen the people of the red city would only respond to her with anger and disgust. The element of how children perceive the world plays a role in the film, as Isaac's son Phillip is not entirely aware of the danger Nyla could be put in if she is discovered. When we began to consider a twist or some sort of symbolism that we could incorporate into the story, Elijah and I grew only more excited about the project. We could both feel it growing into something really powerful.

We knew it would not be a project that we could take on with just the two of us. I had never animated anything to the quality and extent that we were planning for *Violet* to be. The project would also be my first experience working on a short film, let alone co-directing it. I reached out to several students from my animation classes who I felt would have the dedication and excitement that we needed for *Violet*. What started with only Elijah and I grew to a team of six.

I am incredibly thankful for my fellow classmates and friends that agreed to be a part of the project. There was nothing that Elijah and I could really offer them in terms of payment, but everyone was eager to work on *Violet* anyways. We all knew if we worked at it hard enough, *Violet* would be a valuable experience for our resumes and an additional work for our demo reels.

The team worked together to figure out our roles. We would all be wearing different hats, but also wanted to work best to our individual abilities. We divided ourselves between

storyboarding, prop design, and background illustrations, and planned ahead for who would take responsibility for rough and clean animation passes. We wanted to keep in mind the interests that we as individuals had within animation so that we would have work to add to our portfolios within the areas we wanted to focus in.

Before we had our team assembled, I was already developing the look of the film. I started with character designs, first making rough sketches for Elijah to see, gauging what style he appeared most drawn to. Elijah was thinking that the direction for character design should be similar to Disney's signature style, but not quite. I took to the artists I have followed on social media to gather some ideas for style. I have been an admirer of artist



Fig. 1. MacFarlane, Amanda. 2019.

Amanda MacFarlane's work for quite some time and mainly looked to her drawings for inspiration during this process (see fig. 1). I wanted to avoid making the characters too simple, especially in their faces, as they would need to be capable to express a wide range of emotions. They did not need to be entirely complex either. I feel Amanda MacFarlane is able to capture a balance between those two ends.

I made sketches of Nyla first, using my preferred digital art program, Adobe Photoshop, on the Wacom Cintiqs that are used in Ball State University's animation labs. When approaching character designs, then and now, I strive to get my initial ideas out quickly in sketches. It is important to me to not worry too much about precision or detail at this stage. However, both Elijah and I were happy with how the first sketches turned out and moved forward with that design (see fig. 2). Thinking back on this now, having gained more experience through the character design class that is part of the animation curriculum, I almost wince at how little

ideation I did at this point. Though I still do this process of quickly sketching what comes to mind, I have learned to also try more ideas. It is critical to make various iterations of a design as

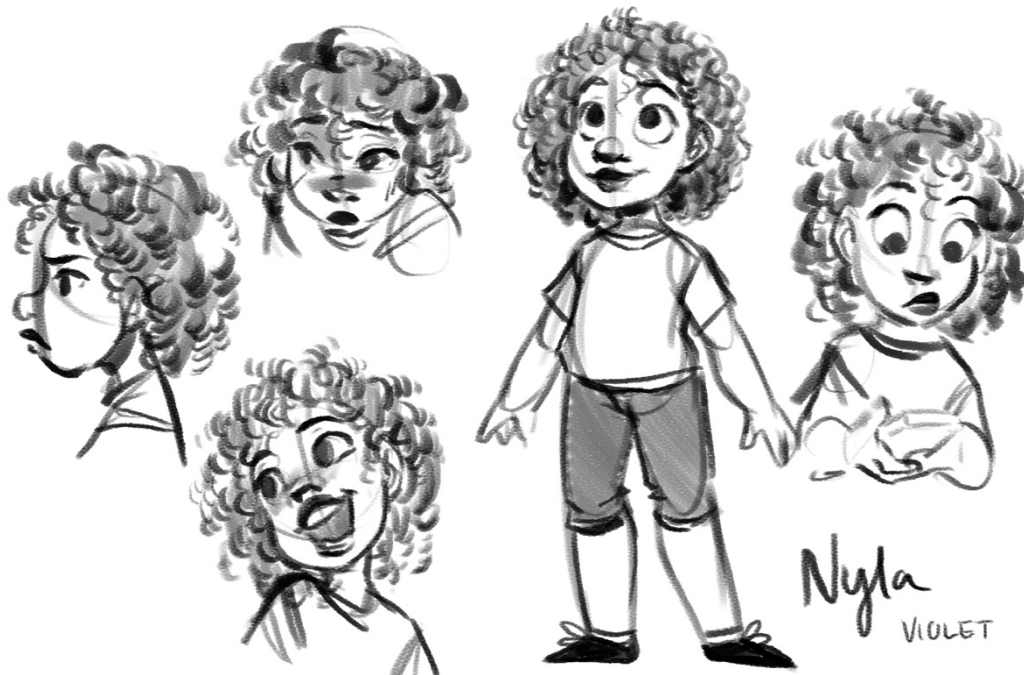


Fig. 2. My first sketches of Nyla. 2018.

it can show the artist what works and what does not. The artist is able to prove why the design that they are putting forward is the best version of itself it can be.

An inspiration for appearance to which Elijah wanted to look was the 2012 Disney animated short film *Paperman*. Though *Paperman* is a film that combines both 2D and 3D animation and *Violet* is only 2D animated, we liked the minimal linework on both the characters and environment (see fig. 3). The film certainly influenced Nyla's design and how the characters were initially colored. We first planned on not having the characters outlined, as shown in my early drawings of the characters (see fig. 4). A little later we would make the decision to outline them, mainly due to ease of animating.



Fig. 3. Still from *Paperman*. Walt Disney Animation. 2012.

Without as much awareness of character design as I have now, back in the summer of 2018 I treated the rest of the characters the same way I did Nyla. I would sketch out the first ideas that came to mind and we would stick with them. I am still proud of the work I did back then, but it is almost amusing to think about how differently I would have approached the process if working on it this year. I recognize the growth in myself as an artist that came from the experiences I have been able to have going through Ball State's animation program.

By the time that character designs were done, the team was in place. We decided that our main method of communication, if not in-person, would be on the communication software Discord. Discord allowed us to separate what we would talk about into different channels and its voice chat feature would prove useful on many occasions. The software also briefly served as our way of organizing files until it was made very clear that having a shared Box folder would be much better. Throughout the process of working on the film, we scheduled both in-person and voice chat meetings with each other, striving for every Sunday afternoon. This way we could receive updates from everyone and keep better track of the state of the project at that point in time.

One of my first worries about working on this film with multiple people of various artistic backgrounds was having a consistent style and



Fig. 4. Nyla colored. 2018.

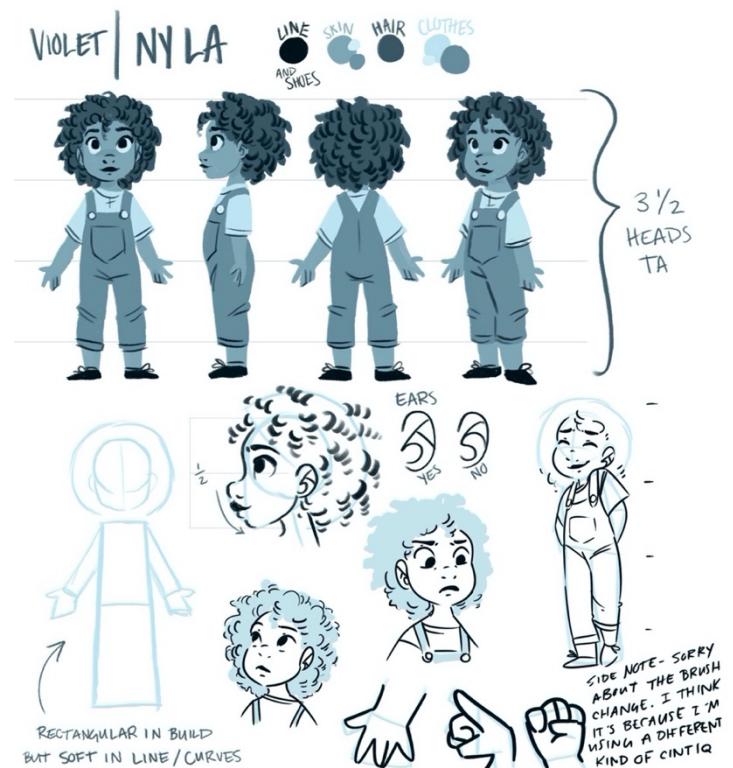


Fig. 5. Nyla character sheet. 2018.

appearance. When *Violet* was first getting started and I mentioned it to Professor Brad Condie, he suggested to me that since I would have a team working on the project it would be best practice for me to eventually create character sheets that would give details of how the characters are drawn (see fig. 5). He even showed me examples that he had from the Disney movie *Mulan*, noting that I should provide details for how the different parts of the characters worked and flowed (“Art of Mulan”). I created the character sheets and asked the team members to practice drawing the characters and understand the process for building them. This also included detailing how the characters would need to be drawn in Toon Boom Harmony specifically, as that is the program we use for animation. The worry of an inconsistent style also played a role in the decision to change the designs of the characters to include dark outlines. More of us were comfortable drawing and animating in that way.

While I had been working on the characters, Elijah had taken the story and written it as a script, detailing descriptions of actions since there is no dialogue. We divided the script into three parts, assigning each part to a member of the team to storyboard. Creating a storyboard allows for artists to plan out films visually. Storyboards include aspects of the film like camera angles and movements, lighting and timing. The program we used to create the storyboard for *Violet* is Toon Boom Storyboard Pro, as that is the program with which we were most familiar from our storyboarding class. Developing the storyboard, we were able to take the descriptions detailed in the script and translate them into a visual, timed out work.

When working on the storyboard and compiling what the other two team members had been creating, it became increasingly clear that the differences in all of our drawing and animation styles was going to be a bigger obstacle than I initially thought. Even with the character model sheets, it was difficult to make the characters look exactly the same while being drawn by multiple different people. Our solution for this after the storyboard was to only have one other member of the team and me to work on the next step of rough animation, as the two of us could match styles easier. For rough animation we used Toon Boom Harmony to block out the key poses of the characters and provide some “in-betweens”, or the drawings made between the key poses to provide motion. Having only the two of us working on rough animation would allow us to create a more consistent look of the characters.

I will acknowledge that because of our shared inexperience in creating animated short films, much of the process for *Violet* did not follow what a typical production pipeline would follow. I started working on character designs and color and concept art before the storyboard for *Violet* was even started and while the script was still being written. We also began rough character animation before the storyboard was given a thorough edit. Later on, during the fall of 2019, I directed the senior animation film *Nothing Personal* and gained better knowledge of what a typical production pipeline would look like.

*Nothing Personal* started as an idea that translated into a storyboard. That storyboard was reviewed and tweaked multiple times before we started the production process. When the time came, research and development, as well as art direction, followed next. It took several weeks for the concept art and designs to be narrowed down and from there we were able to model the characters and environments, rig them so that they can be animated, and begin the steps of animation. *Violet* is different in that it is a 2D film rather than 3D like *Nothing Personal*, but the process that I and other students learned through the senior film helped us gain better experience in the creation of short films in general.

Our process for *Violet* did start clicking into place after I asked Professor John Ludwick to advise the project, near the beginning of 2019. At that time, character designs had been made, we had a storyboard in place, and some rough animation had been started. Elijah and I met with Professor Ludwick, who helped us cut our then 10 minute long script almost in half and gave us great ideas for how to improve the story. We revised the storyboard, even if it meant cutting work out that had already been done, but we knew it was only making the film stronger.

*Violet* became rawer and emotional. Professor Ludwick pushed us to show onscreen the more intense parts of the story we had only been implying, mainly the death of the film's heroic character Isaac. When the children, Nyla and Phillip, go outside to play, unaware of the hostility the red city holds for people from the blue town, their malicious neighbor calls together the city in a mob that confronts the children. Isaac jumps in to save the children at the cost of his own life. His death is one we initially only implied by a quick cut to a black screen and a slow fade to Phillip standing in front of his father's grave. However, Professor Ludwick reminded us that we were not making yet another happy Disney-esque short film. We were tackling a very serious



and heavy subject, which sometimes means making the audience uncomfortable. We needed to push the emotions of the film as far as we could. The audience would now see two children sitting next to a man shot by a hostile mob, his own neighbors, just because he chose to see people as people, no matter where they were from or what their background may be.

Feeling more confident in the message we were trying to tell, everyone on the team dived into our next steps. With the storyboard now finished, one member of the team and I started a new round of rough animation to reflect the changes that had been made. Another team member worked on creating the completed backgrounds based off of the sketches from the storyboard (see fig. 6). As rough animation

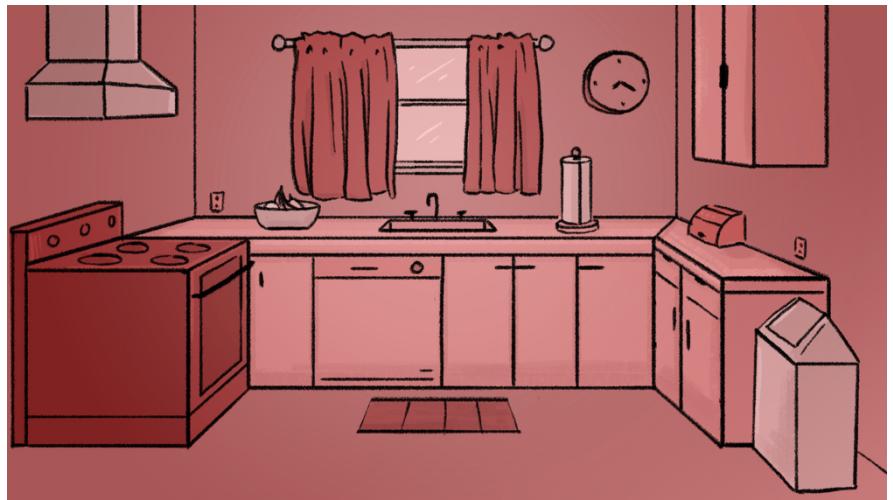


Fig. 6. Kitchen background from *Violet*. 2018.

was finalized, two team members started work on clean animation. This process meant creating clean linework, using the rough animation as a guide, and adding more in-betweens to make the motion more fluid. After clean animation was done we could start filling in color. Meanwhile, Elijah started experimenting with music, developing his own original ideas.

The goal was to have everything complete before the end of April. Unfortunately, coming back from spring break in March, COVID-19 was starting to pick up speed in its spread throughout the United States. On March 16<sup>th</sup> of 2020, Ball State University stopped holding in-person classes and everything was moved online. Shortly after, the campus was closed to non-essential personnel. Several on our team, including myself, no longer had access to the computers and programs that we needed to continue working on the film.

Progress on *Violet* was essentially brought to a halt. Without a personal computer and tablet that could run Toon Boom Harmony adequately, I was not able to work on any animation. The team members that could still potentially work on it on their personal setups

needed to prioritize figuring out the immense changes to our lives as college students, changes that happened only over the course of a few days. Navigating this new world was going to be a different experience for every individual and Elijah and I did not want to expect so much from the team at this time. We asked the team to do what they could, if they could, but to also take the time that they needed for any other areas of priority.

Since quarantine started, not much progress has been made in animation, but all of the backgrounds are nearly complete. I am encouraged by the dedication the team still has for the project, even though several of us are in situations that render us unable to continue work on it. Those who are able to continue are determined to do so. For me personally, I will be able to find myself in a place later this summer with access to a computer that will run Toon Boom Harmony well and hopefully be able to afford a license for the program. I am excited to jump back into animation and get the film to its completion.

I never could have guessed how the process of creating *Violet* would go. Like any large project, we have gone through a variety of ups and downs. I have learned an incredible amount from the experience of doing something I had never done before at the time. I am thankful that I am able to look back on it now and recognize the growth that I have made as a leader, as an animator, and as an artist.

Elijah, the rest of the team, and I value the message that we want to spread through *Violet* and are going to do what we can to get it out there. Elijah and I have talked about starting social media pages for the film, where we can share behind-the-scenes looks and teasers for when the film is closer to completion. We also plan on submitting *Violet* to film festivals when the time comes. We want the film to impact its audience and move them in some way. What is especially important is the conversation that *Violet* brings to the table. After watching the film, if the audience is moved to continue and share that conversation about race and ignorance, Elijah and I have accomplished what we set out to do.

The export of the film that currently exists is the one made before March of 2020. It can be viewed on Vimeo with this link: <https://vimeo.com/414041468>

The password is: violet2020

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